

The Ethical Impossibility of War Today

BY

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THE ESSENTIAL thesis is that a change has come about under modern conditions that made war ethically unacceptable even for one who was not an orthodox pacifist, who for instance accepted the right and necessity of fighting against Hitler.

There are at least four reasons why wars are fought:

(a) for the restoration of justice. This is the classical reason for war that is behind all just-war theory. It concerns a problem that arose historically in the Judaeo-Christian context. If one accepted the decalogue's prohibition of killing and the New Testament command to love not only neighbours but enemies, what could justify war? An alternative form of the question arose only when the basic acceptability had been subsumed: which wars are just?

(b) as an instrument of policy, the "continuation of politics by other means". This as a reason for war sounds cynical and has no recognised place in just-war theory. But after the revulsion of public feeling from the horrors of the 17th century religious wars, which had ostensibly been conducted according to just-war theory, the acceptance of war as an instrument of policy in the 18th century made that period's wars far less horrible than the 17th century's.

(c) as a distraction from the nation's, the government's or the ruler's difficulties elsewhere. This is normally the reason for attacks on scapegoats, and as recently as a few months ago suspicions were voiced that the nuclear alert by the USA during the Middle East war had to do rather with Mr Nixon's Watergate difficulties than with a Russian threat. The only remedy or alternative here is vigilance.

(d) for the sake of a high intensity of living or for the proving of masculine worth (*machismo*). Low intensity life is simply unexciting, so that the provision of nothing better is itself a cause of war.

War Justification

Traditionally, the classical just-war theory was not always an effort to promote the acceptance of war, though it was at the crucial starting point of its history. Instead it was usually an effort either to eliminate war as a possibility or, more realistically, to limit and temper it. But while this was true at a theoretical level, in practice the leadership of Churches or other sources of ethical teaching, as part of the establishment, has been expected (seldom failing to fulfil the expectations) to accede to State wishes and provide, out of just-war theory, a rationale to justify whatever war the State chose to indulge in. Thus all the religious and ethical forces have quite blandly co-operated with the cynicism that followed the 1914-1918 war. After literally millions of dead had been piled up in most irresponsible fashion, each country simply built an impressive monument to them somewhere—Whitehall, the Arc de Triomphe, Arlington National Cemetery—and called them "glorious".

The Romans and most other ancient peoples, including the "barbarians", had no problem about the justification of war. Their ethics called for obedience to the State, their personalised ideals of manhood, *virtus*, saw war as a proving ground for masculine worth, and their religions had warrior cults. The automatic pacifism of the early Christian community had its bases in the decalogue and the love of neighbour, but was closely allied with all ethical outlooks that proceed from an absolute respect for

human life. It was slowly eroded by two factors: obedience in the Roman context to the bidding of the State and a reluctance to turn away converts from among the soldiers of the imperial armies. The major change came only after Christianity had become the State religion of the Roman Empire.

In the Constantinian order, Church and State were seen as the twin pillars of order, closely linked, with the Church serving as paradigm to the State in defining ideals and ethical imperatives. Constantine's own conversion was explicitly in the context of victory in battle. He and his administrators assumed the rightness of war as an instrument of State policy as a matter of course, and expected divine favour in it. This changed situation of the Christian Church with regard to war was reinforced by the barbarian threat to the existence of the Empire, its order and its culture. Quite contrary to its own internal doctrine, the Church identified its interests with the preservation of the Empire and made its choices on war and peace accordingly.

Augustine was the key man who made the fatal choice for the Christian Church and for Western history. He launched the Just War theory explicitly in order to justify the use of war as an instrument of policy. His problem was, in view of the decalogue and the love-your-enemy teaching, when it could be justified to resort to war. His answer, with the barbarians at the gates, was that war could be the resort in order to defend or restore justice. This is a hard argument to refute, since it treats our responsibility as an imperative.

Five Conditions

The conditions prescribed in the traditional theory can generally be reduced, among the many variants in medieval, Baroque and modern teaching, to five: (1) just cause; (2) necessity, or the exhaustion of all other means; (3) legitimacy, or declaration by a supreme authority; (4) proportionality, i.e. between the means employed or harm caused by the war and the good (restoration of justice) sought; and (5) right intention, which could only be the restoration of justice itself, not vengeance, the humiliation of the enemy, saving of face or any of the other alternatives that are common in practice.

The criterion of a just cause was always the least successful of the conditions in limiting wars, insofar as the decision on what war was just or when justice needed defending was left to the State. In Roman law, the will of the ruler was law, making what the State commanded *ipso facto* just and binding on the subjects. In the modern State too, the citizen who fails to participate in and approve what the "Nation" (a new holy word) has taken as its common purpose in a war effort, or who actively opposes it, can expect small sympathy from his fellows.

As regards necessity as a condition of a just war, to claim that all other means for the restoration of justice have been exhausted is necessarily an insult to human ingenuity, imagination, creativity. In practice, people or nations deciding to go to war do not go through a process of exhausting other means: they may go through a process of arguing that they have done so, but in fact they go to war because that is the way they have decided to do it, or that is what they would really enjoy doing.

The legitimacy condition grew up in the context of the Holy Roman Empire idea. The requirement that a just war could only be declared by a supreme authority (modern theory is likely to see this in a difficult-to-define "the people") was a way of providing a suitable and stable alternative to war. If there is only one legitimate supreme authority, he can always arbitrate (this is related to the justice condition) except in those cases in which he must himself declare war to prevent a violation of justice or punish a defiance of his authority. What thwarted this great concept

was the weakness of the Empire itself, the existence of kingdoms and principalities outside its jurisdiction, and eventually the conflict between Papacy and Empire. The idea was periodically renewed later, e.g. by Henri IV of France. Moralists, especially Catholics, of the 16th and 17th centuries, seeing the need for a supreme arbitrating authority, appealed to the Pope. The just-war theory was only viable if there were one supreme authority, a Pope or an Emperor or world government or a strengthened League of Nations. Publicity for the United Nations in its early days made much of this kind of function for the Security Council and its Police Actions. The only serious effort to apply this theory was in Korea, with most unhappy results for the UN; its peace-keeping forces have since limited themselves to standing between conflicting forces while alternative solutions are sought.

Proportionality as a condition for a just war is the burden of the argument that under modern conditions war has become unacceptable even for one who is not an absolute pacifist. However, lest this seem too dry and theoretical as a criterion for judging the humanity or inhumanity of war, we can point to the quite spontaneous revulsion that came from people's common sense—rationally, emotionally and intuitively—at the conclusion of the Thirty Years War in the 17th century. Such carnage, for whatever reason, could not be tolerated again, and the whole approach to war for the succeeding century and a half had to flow into different channels.

The requirement of a right intention as a criterion for the just war, that it be for the restoration of justice and no other purpose, is too moralistic. Actual motivations are never that clear. The other reasons why wars are fought have to be recognised and provision made for the alternative satisfaction of the basic needs they manifest if we do in fact reject war, whether on absolute principle or as a thing no longer viable or tolerable under present conditions. Still the complexity and eventual inextricability of motives in war does eventually produce the same common-sense revulsion as mentioned above. A convenient illustration is in the concluding line of the film, "Bridge on the River Kwai", when the last surviving character cries "Mad, mad!"

Change for the Worse

Our concern, however, is with what has actually happened in modern times to make the notion of a just war no longer viable. We have to recognise that the theory was never more than a reluctant acceptance of war and an effort to temper it. But under present conditions the just-war theory no longer manages either to justify or temper war, and even becomes an exacerbating factor in wars, making them more frightful than they would otherwise be. What has changed?

The level of fanaticism was the first to get out of control. This first occurred in the 11th century Crusades, when for the first time since the "barbarian" invasion of the Roman Empire it was Christendom against the non-Christian world, but under new circumstances that made the religious motivation far more paramount. The religious orders of knights—Templars, Hospitallers, Teutonic Knights, etc, were indices of the new fury. The concept behind their foundation had been in part to tame and civilise the blood-thirsty warrior class of the time, but it was singularly unsuccessful: the religious knights prayed (or preyed) a lot but were no less savage for it. The treatment of the Albigensians and later other heretics rose in their context. It was with the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries that the devilisation of the enemy became complete, and any atrocity could be worked on him, but this produced its own revulsion at the end of the Thirty Years War.

Napoleon made the difference that determined our modern pattern. His conscript armies of millions meant a total mobilisation of the popula-

tion and resources of the country, a total claim of the State, the "Nation", on every individual and the whole society to serve the common war goal. The concept is fundamentally totalitarian, and it is the basic modern pattern in the "democracies" as in any other State.

As this kind of war was practised, any moderated or qualified view of the enemy gradually faded. The US Civil War, with its four-years stalemate, gave the much neglected warning of what the First World War would be and produced a tide of hysteria in both sides that has still not receded from American life. The Austro-Prussian War was over too quickly to let popular tempers get too dangerously high, but the Franco-Prussian War left a lasting scar on the *psyche* of the defeated French. Both the First and the Second World Wars produced a full devilsation of the enemy, differing from the situation in the 17th century wars because of the scale provided by full mobilisation. There was a special American contribution to the whole development because of the peculiar messianism of the American "land of liberty". The enemy of a totally mobilised "nation" must, on the never-absent supposition that the war is just, be totally unjust, diabolic, deserving of total defeat. Hence directly because of just-war concepts the war is made more rather than less ferocious and total. Unconditional Surrender (an American concept) is essential. War can no longer be fought for limited goals without risking the unbearable disillusionment of the nation's faithful.

Taking Sides

Lip service is still paid to proportionality as a requirement in war. The defeated can be accused of their war crimes as at Nuremberg, but to assume that one's own victorious and just cause could be guilty of war crimes is a blasphemous violation of patriotic duty (witness the treatment of the Mylai massacres, including even the one trial, that of Lieutenant Calley).

In the context of the post-Napoleonic total mobilisation for war, the weight of modern technology gives the last turn to the screw, and this is the basic thesis: it cannot be expected, as a moral possibility, in a war between modern industrialised States, that such restraint will be practised as not to use all the means necessary to defeat the enemy. The same is true in cases where smaller stand-in nations do the fighting in lieu of the large industrialised States, supplied and backed by them. There exists now an oversize capacity for destruction. Always, when defeat threatens, the use of a little more force might make the difference. The stand-in countries provide, further, a convenient laboratory for new weapons technology. It was obvious in the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war that new tanks, anti-tank weapons and ground-to-air missiles were being tested out for the benefit of the great powers. The stocking of poison gas of Russian origin for Iraqi use against the Kurds points the way for the first experimental use of this weapon since 1918, in a discreetly remote situation. The Vietnam war was as much a weapons laboratory as had been the Spanish Civil War in the '30s.

This is a temporal argument against war, of special force today although it has been used before, e.g. at the time of the introduction of the cross-bow. It can be obscured in two ways. One is when it is seen only in terms of nuclear weapons, as it was to a great extent by the Nuclear Disarmament movement. This had the effect of distracting attention from the destruction that can now be caused by the totality of modern technology and its weight and power even in what we choose to call "conventional" weapons, not merely the ABC weapons. This was a *cul-de-sac* into which the 20th century Roman Catholic anti-war tradition fell also. The World War II messages of Pope Pius XII (actually the work of the later arch-reactionary Cardinal Ottaviani) had drawn the conclusion that modern technology made war intolerable. Thomas Merton had taken up this argument,

developing it into a coherent neo-pacifism, and from him had come the likes of the Berrigans. But with Pope John XXIII this Catholic anti-war stream concentrated, like the Nuclear Disarmament movement, so exclusively on the nuclear war threat that the more general argument was lost sight of. That imbalance was largely corrected by the anti-Vietnam War peace movement.

The argument can be obscured also by absolute pacifism, that accepts no exceptions to the decalogue/love-your-enemy/ absolute respect for life priorities. This leaves no room to recognise that anything has changed from previous times to now, or that the question of war and peace is now more serious even than it has been before. The Augustinian argument about the restoration of justice remains an imperative.

What has been said about the unacceptability under modern conditions of war between major industrial powers or their stand-ins applies primarily to international wars. It applies also to the "wars of national liberation" (Chinese term), revolutions, guerilla actions. The use of violent methods even for overturning an actually oppressive system is internally corruptive to the liberation movement, hence self-defeating.

The same proportionality argument applies to these wars. The police or "security forces", the armed might of the State, always have greater physical power and cannot (as a moral possibility) use restraint if they are losing and could win with more force. Hence the liberation movement's use of countering force to the State's violence becomes, in reaction, more and more extreme, corruptive. The same devilsation of the enemy takes place on the basis of just-cause argument in this context. There is the same fundamental frivolity to the argument that there are actually no alternatives to violence that have not been tried. And worst of all, the seeds of fascism are unavoidably laid in the liberation movement in the course of its campaign.

There is no service provided in simply moralising either over the international wars or the internal liberation movements. What we need instead is the creation of new institutions, new social forms which will right the injustices, make possible a fuller life and give scope to the most positive forces of people and nations. Neither efforts to patch up the old injustices and make the old systems appear to work for a little longer, nor a revolutionary sweep to clear away all the old structure and start anew will accomplish this, but only such growth into alternative social forms.

(Summary of a lecture on March 10)